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THE SOCIOLOGY OF MORAL JUDGMENT: SOCIAL AND ETHNIC FACTORS*

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Abstract

Social and ethnic differences in moral judgment are examined and a critique of the cognitive-developmental model is presented in this article. In opposition to Piaget and Kohlberg, the thesis advanced here is that morality and moral development are culturally and socially determined constructs. While Piaget postulated the presence of qualitatively distinct stages of moral development to be found in all societies, the position presented here is that the number of stages, the content of the stages, and the order of the stages varies across cultures. While Kohlberg asserts that morality is located in the psychological structures of the individual, our position is that moral reasoning and behavior is largely determined by such social factors as role demands, class interests, national policies and ethnic antagonisms. Moreover, one cannot be moral in an immoral social role irrespective of childhood socialization, psychological predispositions or commitment to abstract principles.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF MORAL JUDGMENT:

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Piaget (1952) viewed cognitive development as consisting of a sequence of stages, proposing the stages to be universal and invariant. Social transmission (e.g., culture, family) was considered a key variable in the rate of development according to Piaget's early writings. Piaget contended that an individual's intellectual development was largely the consequence of social factors, such as language (Piaget, 1926) and parental and peer support and constraint (Piaget, 1965). While the content of development was socially determined, the structure was not.

Piaget's emphasis on structure is evident in his study of moral development(1965). He focused on the application and the consciousness of game rules in order to generate moral stages from behavior patterns he observed in children. Piaget's method was to play marbles with the children of Geneva. In response to his probing questions (e.g., "Who makes the rules?" or "Can you change the rules?"), the children explained the rules as they played. Piaget concluded that younger children were seen to be objective in their moral judgments; that is, they judged an act to be right or wrong solely in terms of the relation of the act to the rule. Older children, however, were seen to be subjective in their moral judgments; that is, they took the intentions of a person into account when judging the moral rightness or wrongness of an act.

These two responses represent two basic levels of moral development, heteronomy and autonomy (Piaget, 1965). Unilateral respect for parents or other authorities and the rules they prescribe is characteristic of heteronomous morality (morality shaped by others). Mutual respect for peers or equals and a

rational respect for rules that guide interaction are characteristic of autonomous morality. Thus, it is the nature of social relations and eventually societal complexity that structures the type of moral reasoning found in individuals. From Piaget's early stance it follows that morality is to be discovered more in the structure of society that it is in the structure of human cognition. Later, however, he altered his position, negating the significance of Social factors but emphasizing action as the basis for cognition (Piaget, 1952;1954).

Two features of Piaget's approach have become standard for Kohlberg's structural view of moral development (Edwards, 1981:503). These include: (1) a method, the flexible clinical interview, which allows the tester considerable freedom to probe the "whys" of the subject's belief to uncover the underlying level of structure; and (2) a theory about causal transition from one stage to the next, that social experience stimulates development by encouraging processes of role-taking (the coordination of perspectives of self and others as a basis for choosing).

Kohlberg's investigations begin with confronting an individual with stories that pose a moral dilemma, many of which set up opposition between a law (or norm) and a human need. The dilemmas encourage respondents to answer on the basis of their cognitive maps regarding morality. Kohlberg's moral dilemmas present a conflict such that a particular response is clearly not the only conceivable one that is acceptable to make. The conflict may center around the need for a choice between two culturally unacceptable (or acceptable) alternatives. While the substantive response the subject makes is irrelevant, what is of concern is the type of reasoning s/he uses in deciding how to resolve the conflict.

Kohlberg (1969,1971) proposes that there are six possible stages of moral development:

> "a three-level progression from an egocentric understanding of fairness based on individual need (stages one and two), to a conception of fairness anchored in the shared conventions of societal agreement (stages three and four), and finally to a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity (stages five and six)" (cf. Gilligan, 1982:27).

He asserts that these six stages form a universally invariant sequence in full accord with all the requirements of stage theories (see Kohlberg, 1969:348-349, 352-353; Piaget, 1960).

Critique of Cognitive-Developmental Theory

Cross-national research suggests that the rate and terminus of moral development is highly variable from one culture setting to another. Individuals in highly industrialized settings are reported to move through the lower stages at a more rapid rate and to achieve higher stages than do individuals in less industrialized and less urban settings. Cultural complexity is salient since greater societal complexity is linked to higher stages of moral development (Edwards, 1975). Schweder (1982), Simpson (1974), Sullivan (1977), Gilligan (1977,1982), Gilligan and Murphy (1979), and Murphy and Gilligan (1980) have critiqued Kohlberg's theory and its accompanying method as basically impaired and biased. We now turn to examine these critiques in detail.

Sullivan (1977) views Kohlberg's theory as liberal ideology rooted in certain socio-historical conditions. This includes the supposition that it is an ideal that humans are rational, a focus on justice and individual rights, and a commitment to the concept of social contract. Stage 6 reasoning is parochial vis-à-vis a

universal objective for "moral" persons. Kohlberg's framework assumes a deducible, fair and just society. Consequently, it is unable to consider injustice in contemporary society (this is discussed later). Sullivan also draws from the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lukacs in criticizing Kohlberg's stance of "abstract formalism." The focus on form comes from the form-content distinction central to structural stage psychology (Kohlberg, in press). When formalism is applied to ethics, rightness is a matter of the universal form of the principle followed. According to Kohlberg's metaethical assumption of formalism, an ethical stance can be agreed upon in prescribing moral structure without reaching consensus on the substance of ethical values.

Sullivan sees Kohlberg's position on formalism as conservative ideology supporting the status quo. Kohlberg's views involve an unconscious "defense of exploitation" while being theoretically based on notions of individual rights, justice, and human freedom. In dichotomizing form and content, cognition and behavior, Sullivan argues that Kohlberg erroneously equates the more complex and abstract with the more right and moral. Sullivan, and as we shall see later in Gilligan, suggests that there is a lack of affect, emotion, and moral sensitivity and imagination in Kohlberg's framework. In sum, Sullivan points to the incompleteness of a structural theory of moral development and the bias of an ideology rooted in Western culture. Kohlberg's use of false dichotomies results in an alienated and "morally blind" perspective of persons as moral agents.

Simpson (1974), like Sullivan, disputes Kohlberg's stages as culturally universal. There is a dearth of postconventional (stages 5 and 6) scores in non-Western, underdeveloped, and rural cultures. If postconventional reasoning is found more prevalently in urban cultures that are Western influenced, then it

follows that Kohlberg's invariant stage sequence, particularly the conceptualization and operationalization of the highest stages, is culturally biased and ethnocentric.

Simpson argues against the claim of cultural universality on philosophical and empirical grounds. Empirically, there is a lack of postconventional reasoning in the protocals of individuals in some third-world cultures. Moreover, regression has been found in some cultures and even in some of the American subjects in the longitudinal study by Colby et al.(1983). Finally, Simpson finds the measures to be methodologically problematic. The scarcity or absence of postconventional reasoning in some cultures may not mirror actual disparity in moral judgment. Instead it reflects differences that occur due to a lack of understanding of the background of subjects. Thus, the researcher needs to be more sensitive to the conditions that affect performance during the Moral Judgment Interview.

Simpson used three examples to illustrate this final argument. First, the scoring of a subject as postconventional may not represent the presence of underlying stage structure but may only be a reflection of linguistic sophistication. The concepts expressed by stage 5 subjects depend on such a high level of abstraction that would automatically exclude most people (including American adults). Next, the moral dilemmas are used in a constraining interview format and may not be a familiar or relevant context to gauge moral thinking. Finally, insensitivity to cultural meaning on the part of the interviewer, scorer, or researcher could result in the misinterpretation or devaluation of responses from other cultures. The scoring manual needs to be expanded to include indigenous examples of reasoning at higher stages, if it is to avoid missing or misinterpreting the reasoning of culturally diverse subjects (Kohlberg, Snarey, & Reimer,

in press).

As with Sullivan, Simpson indicates that a research based scale of development cannot be applied objectively or universally since it is a product of a certain cultural background at a particular point in time (its genesis in modern Western society and ideology). Simpson also objects to the claim of universality on the basis that it provides the opportunity for making invidious comparisons between cultures. That is, the stage sequence implies a scale for grading some cultures as "morally superior" and others as "morally deficient." Development theorists use infant mortality rates, education, income equality, gender equality, and caloric intake as non-psychological tests of development. One should use both.

Schweder (1982) also criticizes the claim of universality in Kohlberg's perspective. He asserts that morality is historically and culturally relativistic. Schweder opines that moral standards might be like language and food; different across cultures but equal. He borrows from MacIntyre (1982) to attack the assumption of rationalism of Kohlberg. Attempts since the Enlightenment to develop a rational underpinning for a universal, objective ethic have been constructed out of non-rational presuppositions, premises which any rational person could reasonably deny. Rational foundation turns out to be the soft sand of preferred (and often shared) assumptions. At its confines, moral discourse becomes ideology, a deceptive type of "mock rationality."

Schweder asserts that Kohlberg is unable to separate content and form. Further, contrary to Kohlberg's theory, there is no formal similarity of moral reasoning at the postconventional stages. Kohlberg's conceptualization of justice is a form of liberal ideology, faithfully endorsed by secular humanists but not required by reason or fact. Like Simpson, Schweder feels that

the data base of the theory is weak (i.e., the dearth of stage 5 or 6 reasoning in non-Western societies). Finally, he argues that the data do not support the Piagetian assumptions of invariant stage sequence and structural wholeness. Cortese (in review) has found horizontal décalage (internal inconsistency in moral judgment) in his research in which the structured whole hypothesis is tested.

Gilligan (1982) provides a "sweeping critique of all major developmental theories on the grounds that they are biased against women" (Colby & Damon, 1983:474). She attacks Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg for defining morality as justice. Kohlberg's theory was based upon his all male sample. Moreover, theoretical revision has been derived from the longitudinal analysis of that sample (e.g., Colby et al., 1983). Longitudinal analysis of data on females did not occur until 1969. Theoretically, if women do not participate in society's secondary institutions (through education and work responsibility), then they are not likely to acquire those role-taking abilities necessary for the progression to higher stage reasoning as defined by Kohlberg (1969).

Kohlberg (in press) acknowledges the importance of an orientation of care, connectedness, and responsibility in moral reasoning. He also admits that the scoring manual does not lead to a complete assessment of this orientation. Gilligan suggests that this type of moral reasoning is predominantly used by females, while males tend to use a rights or justice orientation. She concludes that Kohlberg's framework (especially the post-conventional level) "reflects a limited western male perspective and may therefore be biased against women and other groups whose moral perspectives are somewhat different" (1982:36).

Murphy and Gilligan (1980) and Gilligan and Murphy (1979) have found regression in prescriptive reasoning about justice in early adulthood (using the standard dilemmas). Conversely, they discovered developmental progression on real-life dilemmas. The responsibility dimension is seen as more context-relevant than the justice orientation. In opposition to Kohlberg's abstract moral principles, Gilligan and Murphy believe that the more mature mode of thinking relies on contextually relative perceptions of the factual moral situation and its psychological consequences. The postconventional morality of justice is conceptualized as an adolescent type of overly-theoretical and overly-abstract moral perception that potentially transforms into a contextually relative morality in adulthood.

Kohlberg's stage 6 focuses on logical comprehensiveness that promotes autonomy rather than connectednessand sets up moral dilemmas as mathematical equationsrather than judgment, wisdom, and transcendental creativity. The logic of abstract reasoning, however, falls apart in the context of a real-life dilemma. That is, the application of clear-cut moral guidelines are irrelevant in the face of multi-dimensional personal crises. Thus, relativism results from actual experiences of contradictions in conflicts between abstract moral principles and the factual complexities and ambiguities of real-life situations. Whereas the primacy of reason and the conception of the moral ideal is stressed by Kohlberg, an alternate view is to center on the diversity and disorder of experience, the possibility that life itself is unfair. The point is not to ignore reason but to transcend it.

While the works of Piaget and Kohlberg are of monumental importance in reflecting on moral judgment and upon moral behavior. there is a major flaw in the body of their works. The assertion of six and only six stages (Kohlberg, 1969) with one

and only one final, mature mode of moral judgment preempts all other moral systems for all time. An alternate view is that each social or ethnic group constructs a sequence of moral development and a mode of moral judgment appropriate to its own circumstances which are neither morally superior nor morally inferior to the cognitive-developmental model. Rather, they simply are different in that diverse social ends are sought.

Let us now examine some of the research on ethnicity and social class as it relates to various aspects of human development.

Ethnic Background and Social Class

Human social and cognitive development is largely an outcome of the child-rearing practices of the cultural subgroups which make up a modern complex society (Havighurst, 1976:56). Social class groups and ethnic groups (people who have a common past history and generally share ways of life including language, religion, and social identity) influence individuals through the same mechanisms: family activity, peer group, linguistic concepts, common literature, work in formal associations, in-group marriage and segregation. The social classes are among the most pervasive and powerful in their influence (Gordon, 1964:52; Havighurst, 1976:56). However, ethnic groups are also effective, more so at the lower-working-class level than at the upper-middle-class level.

There has been a primary controversy over the relative significance of race and socioeconomic status. In The Declining Significance of Race, William Wilson (1978) charged that economic class now is a more salient factor than race in determining life chances for blacks. Charles Vert Willie (1979), in Caste and Class Controversy, provided a direct rebuttal to Wilson. Willie argued that Wilson's work is part of a series of publications

(e.g., Jencks, 1972; U.S. Labor Department, 1965) that obscures the focal point of the freedom movement among racial/ethnic minorities. The significance of race is increasing, Willie maintains, especially for middle-class blacks who, because of integration programs (e.g., school desegregation and affirmative action) "are coming into contact with whites for the first time for extended action" (1979:157). While conceding positive opportunities through desegregation, there are also new opportunities for prejudice and discrimination that have not existed under conditions of segregation.

The case for the basic importance of social class in socialization is based largely on the proposition that early child-rearing practices and resources are fundamental and these vary with social class (e.g., Kohn, 1963). Bernstein (1964) has attempted to show that basic cognitive structures, language styles, and value orientations which children absorb within the family may be expected to vary with ethnicity as well as social class. Johnson and Sanday (1971) found striking differences between blacks and Anglos at low income levels concerning value themes. Blacks were lower on 'trust in people,' 'future orientation' and 'individual responsibility for poverty.'

Comparisons of blacks and other minorities with Anglos at middle-class levels have not revealed significant differences. For example, in a study of moral judgment in Chicano, black, and white young adults, no significant differences among ethnic categories were found (Cortese, in press). Subjects were college students, typically from middle-class backgrounds. This means that ethnicity is less powerful in the middle class than in the classes below it. Why? In the process of social mobility, the formerly lower-class people who are now mobile have tended to move into the 'mainstream' of economic life and thus acquired an

upper-middle-class life style while losing some of their ethnic characteristics. This seems to be true of blacks and people of Spanish origin:

> ... black and Spanish ethnicity do not seem to correlate well with upper-middle-class life style, and therefore they have less influence on the behavior of middle-class blacks and Americans of Spanish origin, though they are relatively stronger than social class influences among the lower-working class (Havighurst, 1976:62).

However, an analysis of social mobility of Chicanos in Southern California (Penalosa & McDonagh, 1966) indicates that upwardly mobile Chicanos do not shed their ethnic identification significantly. Thus, it seems to be the shedding of lower-class culture rather than ethnicity which is most related with upward mobility. Lack of opportunity may delay or preclude development of certain "social skills". This leads us to how differential socialization relates to moral judgment.

Bartz and Levine (1978:414) found that Chicano parents were similar to blacks in that both expected their children to assume earlier responsibility for their behavior more than did Anglos. But although Chicano parents expect early autonomy, the father's decisions appear to be non-negotiable. This pattern engenders unilateral respect in children. Consequently, the process toward autonomous morality is impeded.

To be sure, the Chicano has been influenced by the technological and cultural context variables peculiar to the United States, yet s/he retains the core values of Mexican folk culture and rejects the basic aspects of the dominant value system (Hayden, 1966:19). Murillo (1979:99) states: "Latin values are more closely adhered to than is common in the Anglo culture." Perhaps the availability of recognizable guidelines provides more

emotional security and sense of belonging to its members (Ulibarri, 1966). A moral judgment scale for Chicanos must respond to a Chicano value orientation which strongly emphasizes interpersonal relations rather than individual rights, abstract principles, law and order, or self-chosen principles.

One can conclude from the various critiques of Kohlberg discussed earlier that the structures of moral reasoning used by Western middle to upper-middle class white males appear to be taken as the ideal type for everyone. Similarly, the norm of the dominant people is taken as the model for the entire society.

Moynihan provides such an example in his report on the black family. He suggested that the slow rate of progress by blacks resulted from an alleged matriarchal family structure which is "so out of line with the rest of American society" (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965:29). Implicit in that statement is the assertion that if black families were made over in the image of white families, they might be treated like whites (Willie, 1983). Jensen provides another example in regard to intelligence: "The remedy deemed logical for children who would do poorly in school is to boost their IQ's up to where they can perform like the majority..." (Jensen, 1969:3). The implication is lucid once again. If black children would think like white children, then black children would be treated like white children. Kohlberg, like Moynihan and Jensen, does not appear to consider that how ethnic and lower-class groups reason morally may be how they should be given their existential condition.

There are at least two ideal types -- those of the dominants and the subdominants (Willie, 1983). Both contribute to the structure and process of social organization since culture is a composite of ideal types. The norms and contributions of neither may be ignored. For example, the insertion of large numbers of

black women into the labor force set a precedent for an increasing number of white women being employed outside the home. In 1900, approximately 4 out of every 10 black women were members of the labor force, a proportion far greater than that for whites (Feagin, 1967). The large ratio of black women who work outside the home relative to white women has been often considered as an overrepresentation. But if black women have been overrepresented in the labor force, then white women clearly have been under represented (Willie, 1983).

Young (1980) argues that in mass society the structure of interaction which results in the development of the self is bureaucratically organized. This is contrary to the position of Kohlberg where societal complexity results in an autonomously moral self. Interaction in bureaucracy and other formal organizations, Young continues, is so brief, impersonal, and narrowly focused that the development of a self-system is difficult. In as much as regulations, commands, and job descriptions mediate behavior in bureaucratically organized societies, the development of a morally conscious self is superfluous. Young warns that as personal and societal disorganization increases, it becomes more pressing to evaluate the current state of social psychology, point out its weaknesses, and construct more accurate models of self and society:

> "A society moving toward more fragmented and predatory forms of self needs this self-knowledge more than it needs an army; more than it needs automobiles, more than it needs nuclear based energy and more than it needs Monday Night Football (1980:1)."

It follows that the structure of a class, elitist society needs to be eliminated before a autonomous self is possible.

Morality depends upon more than personal judgment. If

behavior is mediated by ways, orders, company policy, or advertising psychology, then the concept of the autonomous moral self presented in Kohlberg and others is a myth. When one sells one's labor power to a factory, retail firm, insurance company, energy enterprise, or presidential administration and re-election campaign, one sells in the same moment one's moral character however developed it might be (see Candee, 1975). In the act of taking wages, one subordinates oneself to the logics of the firm. One must produce what one is hired to produce whether it be dangerous drugs, chemicals, or energy. One must sell on the terms set by the firm using the sales approach selected by higher authority. Whether those terms are just or those ads are sexist is not a matter of moral judgment for the clerk. In the same fashion, an immoral foreign policy is not subject to individual moral judgment (T. R. Young, personal communication, August, 1984).

Kohlberg's theory is faulty because it represents a model of moral development unconcerned with the relations in the larger society. It assumes equal access to secondary institutions and collective, democratic discourse in policy formation.

Participation in societal institutions and problem-solving and role-playing experiences are necessary for an individual to develop a mature mode of moral judgment. In many instances, lower-class people and ethnic minorities are locked out of this process by dominant groups. Alienation on a macro scale is likely to occur. The rejection of one class of persons by another is not an individual phenomenon. Lower-class people and ethnic minorities either deal with or withdraw from a society that ignores them, is indifferent to their presence, or is intolerant of their participation. Alienated people often fail to adopt the substantive values and related moral stances of society

because they are severed from participating in secondary institutions during their socialization.

The power to implement innovations is the main distinction between whites and ethnic minorities (Willie, 1983). The choice that is unique for dominants is whether to make the system available to subordinants so that all can profit from existing resources. Ideally, no one should gain or lose because of one's arbitrary placement in social stratification. Justice would mean the compensation for disadvantages. However, the exclusive system has not been transformed to an inclusive one since this would entail sharing one's power, privilege, and perogative. Kohlberg's highest stage (6) does address this issue because it is defined as "self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency" (Kohlberg, 1971:165). It cannot handle the injustice of real life -- and that a fundamental premise of human reasoning is self-interest.

Discussion

Throughout the history of moral philosophy, culturally universal standards of ethics have been debated. Such attempts have been intriguing although vigorously criticized given the substantial variation of value configurations and related moral stances across time and from one cultural setting to the next. There has been a recent emphasis on human rights in the academic and political arenas. The notion of human rights appears to imply a hierarchy of ethical standards adequate for moral judging. One must first determine whether, at a basic level, the concept of morality has the same meaning for all cultures. Most, if not all, languages include a word or term which carries the general connotation of morality, duty toward others. To be sure, how cultural systems define individual and group responsibilities and rights vary tremendously. Yet our actions seem to reflect at

least a vague coordination of other and self perspectives.

Let us return to the issue of varying cognitive styles in moral judgment. Several key questions should be addressed: "What are the social conditions under which a morally competent self system arises, what are the obstacles to self-other dialectics, and how may these obstacles be surmounted?" (Young, 1978:2). Young adds that such questions assume that the structure of the self is variable, requiring a supportive social matrix if it is to develop a social self and may not develop at all.

The socialization process in the U.S., according to Young, is not geared to the production of specific social identities for young persons but rather is oriented to the inculcation of skills and techniques which are sellable on the labor market. Stage theory reflects a similar scientific bias. Principled reasoning centers around those technical skills necessary to design and control rational-purposive systems, i.e., systems organized to replace the idiographic world of normative human beings with the nomothetic world of the predictable and the externally controllable. Moral stage theory, which sets this mode of judgment high in the scale of moral development, may be more of a political act espousing modern corporate success for individuals.

The concept of surplus population in capital-intensive production refers to people who are not needed and who do not have the resources to buy the forms of life and leisure identified on mass media as necessary to the "good life" (Young, 1978:6-7). Blacks and Chicanos are more likely to be found in the surplus population and are denied those identities central to the productive process. Morality, as part of ideological culture, is not produced by situated, interacting individuals as presumed in cognitive-developmental theory. Rather it is mass produced via the bureaucratic organization, the media, and a technicized

science. Ideological culture is produced largely by a political elite and material culture is produced largely by technology. Consequently, people in the surplus population are excluded from meaningful interaction with each other (and from the construction of secondary social institutions and social knowledge). Hence, the culturally universal assumption of the cognitive-developmental framework does not seem to hold. "Without jobs or income, the material base with which to produce a social life world in concert with a stable set of relevant and significant others is difficult" (Young, 1978:7). One cannot make judgments to obey property laws when one must satisfy physical needs or is lead to satisfy false needs.

Cognitive-developmental theory and symbolic interactionism do not place an adequate emphasis on how relationships of the means of production relate to the development and exercize of self. Relations of production are crucial for an understanding and evaluation of the structure of self (including moral development), consciousness and culture. The dialectical relationship between self and the systems of production holds the potential for understanding the oppressive character of the relations of production. People forced into menial work by the structure of race, class, or gender privilege may have low self-esteem and this, in turn, may subvert self-control, self-determination and a view of oneself as a moral agent.

Kohlberg's assumptions seem to be representative of a general bias in American social psychology that: "the self is an autonomous, creating, active even determining part of the process by which social reality itself is produced" (Young, 1978:1). Ethnic disparity in moral judgment represents a bias built into the definition of stages (Edwards, 1981:511-512). Accordingly, such differentiation is also accounted for by a lack of assessment

of the relations between, for example, Chicanos and blacks and the systems of production.

There are several possibilities that must be considered (Cortese, in press). First, ethnic groups have different moral structures. Each mode of reasoning is meaningful for its particular existential situation. Second, the cognitive-developmental approach to morality and research findings based on it are ideology which promote the Western white male view as the norm. Finally, morality is a macro and not a micro phenomena. Morality reflects social relations and the structure of society more than the consciousness of "rational" individuals.

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